


# Reflecting on the nature of work in contemporary South Africa: A public theological engagement with calling and vocation

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**Dates:**

Received: 13 Oct. 2019

Accepted: 02 June 2020

Published: 20 Aug. 2020

**How to cite this article:**

Forster, D.A., 2020, 'Reflecting on the nature of work in contemporary South Africa: A public theological engagement with calling and vocation', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76(2), a5847. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i2.5847>

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This article argues for a rediscovery of a theology of work in South Africa that is based on the Protestant notion of calling and vocation. Such a view has the primary intention of emphasising obedience and faithfulness to God rather than self-fulfilment or achievement as the intentions of work. Such an approach can empower and equip the church and individual Christians for effective and faithful living in all spheres of life – both private and public. The article shows that the influences of theological dualism, an unbalanced view of the clergy as primary agents of ministry and mission, and a structures-centred view of ministry and mission detracted from the importance of the church's ministry in numerous spheres of society. A consequence of this was the introduction of a subtle dualism between faith and work. In response to this, the article considers how the church could become an agent of mission and transformation in the world of work. The conclusion of this article is that the South African church could benefit from revisiting and rediscovering a theology of work that is based on the Protestant emphasis of calling and vocation in the public sphere.

**Contribution:** While this article engages the traditional protestant theological notions of calling and vocation, it argues that reconsidering these notions in relation to the contemporary world of work can renew a theology of work and ministry for South African churches to serve their members in achieving God's will in society.

**Keywords:** Work; Public theology; South Africa; Calling; Vocation.

## On work and life

Work must surely be one of the most important topics of our age, not only because a large proportion of the world's population is engaged in some kind of 'work' (some out of choice, others for mere survival), but the largest majority of the world's population are preparing for a lifetime of work through study or some form of training. Miroslav Volf (2001), the Yale Theologian, said the following about the church and the academy's reflection on this very important topic:

Amazingly little theological reflection has taken place about an activity which takes up so much of our time. The number of pages theologians have devoted to transubstantiation – which does or does not happen on Sunday – for instance, would, I suspect, far exceed the number of pages devoted to the work that fills our lives Monday through Saturday. (p. 69)<sup>1</sup>

Recently, some research was published that presented the first empirical engagement with faith and work in South Africa, *Called to work: A descriptive analysis of Call42's research on faith and work in South Africa* (Forster 2014). In the research, it was shown that a large majority of Christians in South Africa had never heard a single sermon on work or their work-life. Even fewer had been equipped to live faithfully as Christian disciples in the world of work. Stated plainly, the research found that the South African Protestant churches had somehow lost a clear and theologically responsible understanding of work (cf. Forster & Oostenbrink 2015:1–8).

Volf (cited in Smit 2003) further comments:

If Christian theology is to offer guidance for life in the contemporary world it will have to tackle [this] task: it will have to show how human work in complex and fast-changing industrial and post-industrial societies can be done in response to the gifts and callings of the triune God, the Reconciler, and the Redeemer. (p. 8)

1. See this very interesting reflection on Volf's work and the resurgence of interest in faith and work: *Faith, work and beards*, <http://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/2845/faith-work-and-beards-why-abraham-kuyper-thinks-we-need-all-three> (accessed 23 September 2013).

**Note:** Special Collection entitled Christian Leadership, sub-edited by Wessel Bentley (UNISA).

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What, if anything does Christianity, and particularly South African Christianity, have to offer in this situation?

This article will engage in a consideration of the importance of work through the lenses of calling and vocation in the Protestant tradition. It will then relate these theological resources to contemporary research on faith and work in the South African context. We shall begin by briefly asking why a public theological approach is helpful to engage this complex and important issue? Next, we shall discuss the Protestant notion of calling to understand something of the theology of work in that tradition. As part of this discussion, we will trace the historical trajectory that has led to the loss of understanding the central importance of vocation and calling amongst South African Christians, and so also the loss of a responsible theology of work. Finally, we shall ask in what ways the church can engage both theologically, and in its public witness and ministry, in the world of work?

## Why a public theological reflection on work?

Work is a central, and important, part of contemporary human existence. Yet, its importance is not acknowledged or given priority in either historical or contemporary theological reflection. An extended version of Miroslav Volf's earlier quotation highlights this reality. He writes (Volf 2001):

[G]iven the paramount importance of work in both liberal and socialist economic and social theory, it is remarkable that in our world dominated by work a serious crisis in work had to strike before church bodies paid much attention to the problem of human work. Theologians are to blame for the former negligence. Amazingly little theological reflection has taken place in the past about an activity that takes up so much of our time. The number of pages theologians have devoted to the question of transubstantiation – which does or does not take place on Sunday – for instance, would, I suspect, far exceed the number of pages devoted to work that fills our live Monday through Saturday. (p. 69)

Why is this so? In the two sections that follow, we shall see that it was a subtle theological error that led to the current divide between faith and work. The content of the Protestant theological tradition set a very important initial direction for faith and work; however, it soon lost its way. Moreover, what we shall see is that theological content alone is not enough to bridge the gap between what we believe about work, and what we should do to be faithful to God in every aspect of life (which also includes faithfulness to God in the world of work).

The South African Ethicist and Theologian, Piet Naudé (who is the head of the Stellenbosch University Business School), recently commented in a public lecture that in his experience when Christians speak about issues of economics (or work) they 'look enthusiastic, but often sound stupid' (Winter School, Stellenbosch University, 04 June 2015). He went on to challenge the audience of theologians to take issues of economics, law, policy and labour seriously in

their theological deliberations. His critique is a call to what Heinrich Bedford-Strohm identifies as the characteristics of multilingualism and inter-disciplinarity in public theology (Bedford-Strohm 2015:3–4; Smit 2017:75). Naudé is correct. Christians do not address issues of public concern, such as work, frequently enough in our formal theological research and reflection. In the few instances where we do so, there is a tendency to address the world of work with resources that are inadequate to engage the complexities and nuances of the issues at hand. We struggle to 'translate' our beliefs into a meaningful engagement with public life. Moreover, we struggle to translate issues of public concern into a theological language and theological approaches that can adequately engage our beliefs and convictions.

This is where a nuanced understanding of public theology may be of some value. Koopman (2010:134) notes a common misconception of public theology, namely, the simplistic understanding that public theology is anything that is contrasted with what might be considered a 'private' theology. Such a view is a mistake because we have seen in many instances that there is no such thing as a so-called 'private' theology. What people believe, if it is truly believed, will always have public consequences. Koopman rightly affirms that this is not the meaning of concept 'public' in contemporary public theologies.

Rather, what Koopman suggests is that public theology is concerned with the 'inherent public nature of God's love... the rationality of God's love for the world... and the implications of God's love for every facet of life' (Koopman 2010:124). He argues that each of these three affirmations approaches the theological task from a different perspective and with a different intention. In making this claim, Koopman draws upon the argument that David Ford makes in his book *The modern theologians* (cf. Ford 2005), namely, all theology addresses in some ways the content of our faith, the rationality of what we believe for the common good and the implications of that belief for all of life (both private and public).

Thus, what is needed is a more nuanced and carefully textured understanding of the notion of the 'public' in public theology. Koopman and Smit rightly point out, in the line of David Tracy (Ruiter 2007; Tracy 1975:287) and Jürgen Habermas (cf. Dreyer & Pieterse 2010:1–3; Habermas 1991; Smit 2007a:11–47), that a more helpful understanding of the notion of a 'public', in public theology, is to understand each particular theological contribution in relation to the different 'publics' of society. Habermas explains the development of the notion of the 'public' (as it has been used in contemporary public theological research) by relating it to critical discourse theory (cf. the excellent exposition presented by Smit 2007a:11–47). Habermas explains that the notion of circumscribed publics, which first emerged as particular public opinions, developed as persons in society began to cultivate agency that allowed them to hold and propagate views, and organise around those thought constructs, in opposition to the dominant publics of the monarchy and the church (which were the two publics of society until the late

middle ages). Simply stated, as persons became economically and politically independent from the monarchy, and learned to think in ways that were not controlled by the church, they began to develop what we would call 'public opinions'. A consequence of the deconstruction of the class structures that were imposed by political power and religious beliefs, by means of increasing economic independence, was of course a measure of both individual freedom and identity, as well as economic and political agency. However, as Weber (2012:1–6) notes, this also played an important role in the establishment of what would later become free-market capitalism. No longer would the monarch, or the Bishop, dictate social standing, or values, increasingly capital and the free market would play this role. This is also not morally neutral, as we shall see in a later section. The increasing importance of economic independence, and economic agency, has also contributed to a social imagination that allows massive economic inequality, corruption, greed and inhumane working conditions to exist. At this point, however, it is simply important to note the emergence of the possibility for ideas, and 'public opinions' apart from the monarchy and the episcopacy – namely, 'public opinions'.

David Tracy developed these notions further by suggesting that there are at least three typological 'publics' in which contemporary theologians can, and should, make a contribution. These are the public of the church, the public of the theological academy and the public of society in general (Smit 2013:13–15; Tracy 1975:287–291, 2014:330–334). For example, the rules, expectations and intentions for how one does theology in the church may differ from the rules, intentions and expectations for how one does theology in the academy. What is helpful about such an understanding is that it shapes the theological discourse in such a manner that it maintains its coherence and sensibility as theological discourse within a particular public, whilst allowing it to be mindful of, and informed by, the discourse theory of the public it aims to engage, address or be addressed by. Thus, public theology translates meaning in a 'multilingual' manner between the three publics of the academy, the church and society at large (Smit 2017:75).

This article will offer a public theological engagement with the Protestant understanding of work and vocation that is intended for the benefit of the church, whilst considering the concerns of society at large, and being framed as an academic theological proposition.

## Work and calling in the Protestant tradition – The loss of vocation

Smit argues that we cannot consider the notion of work within the Protestant tradition without first focusing on the notion of calling and vocation (Smit 2003:8). In his reasoning, Protestant theology must have God, and the will of God, at its very centre. Daniel Migliore (2004) says that theology:

[E]xists to remind us of God's gift and command, and thus to keep alive the question: What would it mean for us personally

and corporately to bear a concrete witness to the crucified and risen Lord in our world today? (p. 15)

In essence, what does God require of me? This is not only a theological question, but also a vocational question. The historian Denis De Rougement (1963:37) suggested that, 'the great social and cultural maladies of the modern age all have this one common characteristic: they deny personal vocation'. As such, one could contend that the notion of 'calling' is important in relation to a theological consideration of work (cf. Forster 2014:6–9; Forster & Oostenbrink 2015:1–2, 7–8).

The Protestant Reformation radically changed the way in which Christians thought about the concept of God's call upon their lives. Leading up to the Reformation the notion of calling was understood primarily as a 'calling out of the world' into the cloistered life of the monastery (Smit 2003:8). Martin Luther, however, insisted that there is no ontological difference, or separation, between the clergy and the laity. All Christians are called by God, not only the monks and nuns who discerned a call to 'leave' the world. Rather, Luther asserted that every believer, by virtue of her or his baptism, is called by God into the world (Smit 2003:8). Luther was the first theologian to use the term calling in the contemporary sense of the word (Althaus 1972:39–40; Kolden 1983:382–390). In doing so, he appealed particularly to 1 Corinthians 7:20 in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) 'Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him'. We know from history that this view gained great acceptance amongst ordinary Christians because it allowed them to see their everyday existence with new meaning and purpose (Calhoun & Nelson 1954:82–115).

However, the ordained orders of ministry at the time confused some by making them believe that they must leave the world to fully honour God. No doubt some would have believed that by not entering a religious order they were either disobedient to God, or that God had no plan (or special plan) for their lives. The theological change that came as a result of Luther's radical understanding of calling to everyday life was that it recognised the importance of history and life in general. Smit notes that in contrast to Luther's notion of calling, those who were in religious movements and orders would at times sweep people up to their way of life, convincing them to give up on history and everyday life (as if God was not active, interested or present in daily life; Smit 2003:8).

This understanding remains a common theological problem in the contemporary church. South African Christians reported that their pastors and ministers often suggested that entering the ordained pastoral ministry was the highest form of calling (Forster 2014; cf. Greene 2001:9):

Because ministers 'run' churches, they often create the impression that their work is more important to God than the work of the church's members. The impression is created that pastors and missionaries do holy work, whilst doctors, teachers, and builders do 'profane' work. (p. 6)

Thus, the significant change that Luther introduced was that he included all Christians and their everyday public, political and economic lives within the 'one calling that comes from God' (Luther, Oswald & Lehmann 1964:17). Smit (2003) comments that:

God calls everybody, not only a select few, [according to Luther] and God calls them with a spiritual calling, and this spiritual calling is not a calling out of everyday life, rather it comes by way of everyday life, through the place and task in which persons find themselves. That is where they are called to be faithful and to honour God. (p. 9; [author's own translation])

One important point that must be noted is that Luther understood that calling as it relates to a Christian's work and life meant that they were to see their work and station in life as a vocation, and not as something that is to be done for gain, status or honour (Luther et al. 1964:17–20; Smit 2003:9).

What Luther emphasised was that, from God's perspective, society was structured with a need for every person, and all tasks and jobs, as necessary for its functioning. In the contemporary worldview, the esteem, status and economic value that we attach to certain tasks and jobs somehow do not reflect God's values, but rather our own (Smit 2003:10). Is a banker, or the work of banking, truly of higher value to God than that of a nurse, a teacher or a stay at home parent?

Luther thus maintained in accordance with 1 Corinthians 7:20 that the believer should remain faithful within the position or work to which God had called them and do their best to honour God in faithfulness, diligence and creativity in that place (Kolden 1983:382–390; Smit 2003:3). This was this attitude that eventually became known as the 'Protestant work ethic' with its two core values of obedience and faithfulness (Poggi 1983:3–4; Smit 2003:9; cf. Weber in Tawney 1958:62; Weber 2012:1–6). Of course, what needs to be remembered is that this was a call to obedience and faithfulness to God first and foremost and not obedience to an employer or a task. This is important because the notion of obedience has been used in manipulative ways by later pseudo-Lutheran theologies, such as in Germany during the rise of National Socialism, to force persons to obey unjust orders or participate in destructive activities (Gridley & Jenkins 2017:23–5; Hassing 2014:80). For Luther, God-directed obedience and faithfulness would have social and economic consequences in everyday life. However, social and political change was not the primary intention behind his view of obedience. His intention was faithful service to God and the achieving of God's will in the world through service.

In the time in which Luther wrote, the economy was less complex and varied than it is today. Most persons operated and 'worked' within familial or community settings (such as the home or the village market, etc.). Even in cities, work and the economy were still largely relational with barter and

trade taking place with known parties for necessary goods and services. Thus, Smit (2003:10) suggests that in some senses the economy was personal rather than impersonal, as it is today. One dealt with persons for the goods and services one needed. This allowed for a full range of human capacities such as care, empathy, generosity, service, and of course also greed, anger, shame and deceit. Yet, the point is that work was not as impersonal as it is today.

Thus, we can understand Luther's view that work can be service or, as a modern commentator Ed Silvos has said, 'work can be worship' (Silvos 2006:191). From Luther's perspective, by doing one's work, whatever it was, one could honour God and serve one's neighbour – this was worthy of one's life. The *vita activa* of daily life almost became as important as the *vita contemplative* of spiritual life in the monastery (Parekh 1981:103–130).

Smit points out that it is important to note the 'almost' in that last sentence (Smit 2003:10–11). Of course, we only need to look around us today to be able to tell that work as an act of worship (or 'higher service'), as Luther envisioned it, did not take hold. The American commentator, Douglas Spada, has described this condition as 'Monday morning atheism'. That is, someone who believes in God (perhaps on a Sunday), yet engages in the world of work as if God does not exist, or has no will or intention for one's working life (Spada & Scott 2011:1–13). As a result, the false values of greed, pride, dishonesty and underserved leisure are more laudable today than hard work, service, humility, sacrifice and honesty.

Smit offers a fascinating historical insight into this shift that led to the divide between faith and work. He does so by tracing social, religious and economic shifts over time. Right at the centre of the problem, he proposes is a loss of the notion of call (Smit uses the Afrikaans word, '*beroep*') (Smit 2003:11). He points out that the loss of vocation comes from a subtle theological shift, and not primarily a social or a political shift as we might assume.

The theological shift that he is talking about is a turn from the one who calls (i.e. seeing one's purpose in life as obedience and faithfulness to God's call), to the calling itself (i.e. seeing one's task in life as the fulfilling of a vocation). The Afrikaans, in which Smit writes, captures it beautifully: it is a turn from 'roeping' (calling) to 'beroep' (job or vocation) (Smit 2003:11–12). In this mistaken shift, a new social imaginary arises (Taylor 2004:23). Charles Taylor (2004) describes modern 'social imaginary' as:

[T]he ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations. (p. 23)

Thus, as Smit points out, work shifted from being an activity that facilitated obedience (work as worship – work as a means of declaring the worth of the one who calls us to the



task), it became an object of worship (work becomes the object of and end of faithfulness, sacrifice and devotion). Preece says something similar when he says that work as vocation is intended to be 'primarily a means and secondarily an end in itself' (Preece 1998:5). This is of course very different from the modern notion of vocation as expressed by Max Weber who says that today vocation is viewed as, 'labour... performed as if it were an absolute end in itself' (cited in Tawney 1958:62).

In *A secular age*, Charles Taylor explains that the social imaginary is an extremely subtle, yet powerful, force that shapes how we live. It is 'the way that we collectively imagine, even pre-theoretically, our social life in the Western world' (cf. Taylor 2007:159–211). Taylor suggests that it is out of this emerging social imaginary of vocation as calling that 'modern individualism' and 'Natural law theory' began to take hold of society (Taylor 2007:126–128, 155–156). Even Christians began to see themselves in relation to their calling in life as a primary orientation and responsibility. Calling started to take on an identity (i.e. to be an educator, doctor, farmer, lawyer, even a pastor, etc.) rather than being primarily orientated towards the Caller (God) (Smit 2003:10). Luther maintained that the aim of Christian discipleship is to become like Christ, not like our vocation (Mattes 2012:142–163). The combination of the rise of the impersonal order (Taylor 2007:270–298) and the modern social imaginary (Taylor 2007:159–211) that was directed to self-fulfilment through vocation, rather than the twin values of obedience and faithfulness to God's call, crept into our understanding of the nature and purpose of work. It was this subtle theological shift that led to an erosion of Luther's notion of calling in relation to vocation and work.

The result is that amongst contemporary Christians, and even more so within secular society, there is no longer a distinction between 'roeping en beroep' [calling and vocation]. So, where Luther (and the Reformer, John Calvin)<sup>2</sup> would have admonished the believer to live for the honour of God by means of faithful work, Christians now mistakenly *adopt the identity* of their vocation as an expression of faithfulness. In other words, the striving in life is no longer to honour God first and foremost in everything one does, but rather to become the mother, the lawyer or the teacher, through which, if there is some opportunity, one may seek to honour God (Smit 2003:11). The *telos* of such reasoning is the emergence of a dualism between one's faith life and one's work life.

So, this is where history has brought us. Such a dualistic view of faith and work is regarded as normal. Yet, just after the Middle Ages and the Reformation, when it began to develop, it was revolutionary. As Smit, Taylor and Sigurdson note, this view led, in large measure, to the sacred and secular divide that would lay the groundwork for modernity and Western secularism (Sigurdson 2013:361–362; Smit 2003:11; Taylor 2007:146–158, 221–299).

2. See, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Leith 2010:157).

If one's life is no longer oriented towards honouring God (whatever one's function is in life, or social standing may be, as we have already established, all functions and social locations are necessary for society to function), but rather to honour God through a specific vocation, then the kind of work that one does becomes all the more important. In this context, persons began to look towards their abilities, gifts and affinity as indicators of the kind of work that they should do (of course, this is a form of Natural Law theory that Taylor speaks about giving rise to a turn from God towards creation and creativity) (Taylor 2007:90–145). Such a view of life, based on the discovery of talent, is in contrast to that of discerning the call of God as an act of divine revelation. This does not mean that talent does not matter, but simply that it does not matter more than calling. As John Wesley (cited in Sweeden 2014), the founder of the Methodist Movement, introduced in the Covenant Liturgy:

I am no longer my own but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering, let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee. (p. xii)

However, Smit notes that the talent and affinity-oriented view of work, and other similar views, led to the development of the modern concept of career guidance, psychometric testing and concepts such as work-fulfilment. These are very contemporary concepts and significant concerns in Western individualistic societies. Rather than the theocentric, Trinitarian structure to life that Wesley included in the Covenant prayer, or that Volf mentioned in our opening quote, society became structured on the principles of individual gain and fulfilment. The logical consequence of this approach to work is that people began to exercise both freedom, and power, in their career and work choices. Certain persons (with access to education, power, wealth and social mobility) were able to choose their work, whilst other tasks and stations were reserved for those who had less choice, less power and less social mobility (sometimes argued along the lines of gender, ability, education, race, etc., but at other times purely as an exercise of power and economic dominance). One can see how such a view has both ethical and theological implications because it impacts upon issues such as human dignity, economic inequality, gender roles and race-based prejudice. At the very heart of this, all is a loss of the concept of vocation as a response to God's call.

The social theorist Jacques Ellul has suggested that it is very difficult, if not almost impossible, to 'incarnate vocation in a society determined by autonomous techniques, multinationals' labor needs and propaganda that allows no autonomous choice of vocation' (Ellul in Preece 1998:2).

This prompts the important question: how many contemporary Christians take the principle of God's calling seriously for their life and work? Moreover, with rising secularism in the Western world, the challenge becomes greater because fewer and fewer persons in society will take seriously that they live for any reason other than self-fulfilment

(at worst), or the common good (at best). However, it is not all bad news.

Zimmermann's (2012a:1) research<sup>3</sup> suggests that the crisis of trust in the ideals of Western secular culture is a major factor in the resurgence of interest in humanism in general, and religious (and Christian) humanism in particular. The vacuum that was left by the exhaustion of Western secularism, and particularly the loss of transcendent and deeper meaning, has created an opening for the resurgence of frameworks of meaning, some of which are positive and life-giving, and others are challenging and even destructive (such as forms of religious fundamentalism) (De Gruchy 2015:196). In such contexts, persons of faith have sought a more just and constructive religious and theological position through the retrieval of '...an ancient [form of] Christian humanism for our time in response to the general demand for a common humanity beyond religious, denominational and secular divides' (Zimmermann 2012b:9–10). Sigurdson (2013:361) does, however, caution that this phenomenon does not necessarily mean there is a return to faith as such, but rather that it points towards a 'post secular' turn in some societies. By this is meant a search for meaning that is not necessarily religious in content, although it is deeply theological. Sigurdson (2013) comments that:

'[S]ecularization' was from the beginning a theological concept, meaning that something – a thing, a territory, an institution or a person – passes over from an ecclesiastically defined condition to a worldly defined condition, as when a Roman Catholic priest no longer lives in his religious community but in the 'secular' world or when a piece of land passes over from ecclesial to worldly possession. (p. 361)

Smit concurs with this notion, stating that the concept of calling has also undergone a form of secularisation (Smit 2003:12). It is not uncommon to hear persons, with little or no faith speaking of having 'found their calling' in life. This could cohere with what Zimmerman, De Gruchy and Sigurdson have mentioned, that is, that people have a deep, perhaps even ontological, desire to discover meaning and what is meaningful in everyday life. Moreover, the impact of global crises in economics (such as the 2008 economic collapse), morality (such as the wars in Africa, Europe and the Middle East), rising terrorism and national insecurity (such as the bombs in Paris, and frequent ISIS attacks across the globe), polarising populist geo-politics (such as Donald Trump in America), coupled with the effects of natural disasters such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the Haitian earthquakes and the South East Asian Tsunami, have caused many people to reconsider the meaning of life (and that all-encompassing aspect of life, work).

3. John de Gruchy notes that there has been a 'critical retrieval of religious, theological and specifically Christian humanism ...during the past decade' (De Gruchy 2015:195). Jens Zimmermann's two important works, *Humanism and Religion* (Zimmermann 2012a) which is addressed to secular humanists, and *Incarnational Humanism* (Zimmermann 2012b), which is more theological and so addressed to the Church and a Christian audience. These works have captured something of the importance of the rediscovery of humanism in general, and Christian humanism in particular.

Perhaps, the church does still have a role to play, not only in the demarcated public of the church but also in the public of the academy (in shaping academic thought and research on the theology of work) and the public of general life (in supporting and shaping an orientation that values calling in relation to work)?

So, this review of the Protestant notions of work and contemporary challenges to this view brings us to the present day. We shall now move on to considering the role and function of the church and vocation, the case for this discussion emerges from the South African perspective for which there is some empirical theological research (cf. Forster 2014:1–9; 'Introduction to Call42' 2013).

## Re-capturing the notion of calling in the contemporary church

In the section 'Work and calling in the Protestant tradition – The loss of vocation', an argument was presented that within Protestant theology there is an affirmation that God has a common calling for all persons (both laity and clergy). Hence, God has a purpose and will for persons at work, and for work itself. From a broad range of literature in contemporary scholarship and popular Christianity, this seems to be a finding that can be substantiated.<sup>4</sup>

Most persons will spend the majority of their waking hours engaged in formal or informal work. The workplace is also where they are likely to face their greatest level of stress and moral challenge, and also have the greatest opportunity to exercise their faith, explore their gifts, give expression to their abilities and make a positive contribution towards God's will for the world (Forster & Oostenbrink 2015:1–8). As discussed above, Luther saw obedience and faithfulness in all of life as a vocation, a response to God's call. Thus, one could contend that the public of the academy has an important role to play in developing theological resources for faith and work, whilst the public of church could guide its members to discover their calling and relating it to their life's vocation (Greene 2001:1–4). We shall now consider some theological resources that could be useful in these tasks.

## Overcoming a flawed theology that upholds a dualism between faith and work life

A major area of concern that arises from the discussion about the loss of the Protestant emphasis on vocation is that we lack credible and rigorous theology on faith and work. In

4. Amongst others, Miroslav Volf has devoted much of his scholarly research to issues of faith and public life in recent years. He is the founding director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, and has published extensively in this field – his most recent book on this topic is *A public faith: How followers of Christ should serve the common good* (Volf 2011). Timothy Keller, another well-known clergyperson and theologian in contemporary western Protestantism, recently released a book with his colleague Katherine Leary Alsdorf which focuses extensively on the notion of work as a calling, *Every good endeavor: Connecting your work to God's work* (Keller & Leary-Alsdorf 2012). There are also many more accessible sources such as Doug Spada and Dave Scott's book *Monday morning atheist: Why we turn off God at work* (Spada & Scott 2011), and the South African book written by Dion Forster and Graham Power, *Transform your work life: Turn your ordinary day into an extraordinary calling* (Forster & Power 2011).

particular, the contemporary church seems to uphold a theology that presents a dualistic view of faith and work (Greene 2010:2–3). Such a theological perspective is a major hindrance to Christians discovering and living out God's calling for their lives, and responding in faithfulness and obedience to God's work in the world (Survey: Top challenges 2013b:6). In the 2014, *Call42* research that focussed on South Africa Christians in the world of work, it was shown that the participants expressed a need, and an expectation for, theological formation, pastoral support and examples ('role models and success stories') that will aid them in discovering their calling in life and being faithful to that calling in the world of work (Survey: Top challenges 2013b:2, 6).

The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity has identified this theological inadequacy as one of the primary weaknesses of the contemporary church in relation to Christians in the world of work. Greene devotes a chapter in his book to describing 'How the workplace was lost' (Greene 2001:9ff.). He highlights five specific points, and one overarching failing, that have led to a dualism between faith and work and the loss of a sense of vocation in work. The result is that Christians in the world of work are under-supported and ill-equipped for their vocation and operate from an impoverished theology for faith and work.

As we suggested in the section 'Re-capturing the notion of calling in the contemporary church', Greene also concurs that there is a *flawed theology on the status of a minister/pastor*. Because the clergy take the primary responsibility for churches, they often create the impression that their work is more important to God than the work of the church's members. As was discussed, this is a return to the pre-Reformation and early post-Reformation impression that pastors, priests and missionaries do 'holy' work, whilst doctors, teachers and builders do 'profane' work (Greene 2001:9). Such dualistic views of work and vocation need to be reconsidered and corrected.

Secondly, Greene points out the flawed *theology of the role of the minister*. Increasingly, in the West, the minister (pastor or priest) has been seen to be responsible for enlisting the 'assistance' of the laity in executing and staffing the ministry of the congregation, rather than equipping the laity for works of ministry and service where they are (i.e. faithfulness to God in their everyday life). The question that needs to be asked is not 'What can this person do for the congregation?', but 'How could the congregation equip this person to be of service God in the world?' (Greene 2001:9).

Thirdly, Greene (2001:10) notes that we have fallen adopted a *false ecclesiology*. The emphasis of most contemporary churches is on the church as a gathered community. Few churches understand that they remain 'the church' when they scatter. As Forster and Power (2011:24) note, 'Monday is proof that Sunday is working'. In other words, God cares as much about what we do on a Monday morning as what we do on a Sunday morning. The ministry of the church should

continue, through its members, in workplaces and homes. It should not only be confined to the location of the church building and the formal times of gathering for worship, teaching and service set aside by the congregation.<sup>5</sup> The contemporary Western Church's obsession with buildings, and focus on performance in worship services has led to the development of an 'attractional' model of church, rather than a missional model of church. The church is seen as a place where people go at a certain time, rather than a community of persons who are scattered throughout the world and the week.

Fourthly, Greene contends that we have accepted a *false theology of creation and money (production)*. We briefly discussed this in an earlier section. As persons found freedom from the Episcopacy (and the monarchy) through economic production, the church and the monarchy began to react. They were threatened by these emerging freedoms and differing 'public opinions', and so a theology emerged that overemphasised the evils of money and wealth production (cf. Smit 2007a:11–47). This does not mean that wealth and some economic systems do not present significant theological and ethical problems to certain Christian beliefs about justice, equity and temperance. Rather, it points to the historical emergence of the theological conviction that all wealth, and indeed, all of the creation of wealth, are sinful and un-Christian. In many contemporary Christian communities, wealth and wealthy persons are regarded with great suspicion and judgement. As a result, many people who have created some measure of wealth feel that the church is deeply suspicious of them, at times even rejecting them. Of course, the pursuit of money as a primary aim in life can be devastating to individuals and communities, and Greene concedes that such a focus is not in keeping with God's will for the Christian individual or society at large (Greene 2001:10–11). However, as Christians, we cannot deny that God created the world and has given each of us a role to play in it. Moreover, we are called to live faithfully and responsibly in the time and context in which we find ourselves. At times we may be required to withdraw from participating in evil social, political or economic systems. At other times, the faithful Christian will need to live a virtuous and ethical life within an imperfect social, political or economic system. We cannot deny that at present, some persons are called to preach, others are called to build, or serve, or create. The respondents to the *Call42* survey, and the majority of literature that was studied in this area, agree that we can honour our Creator when we use our talents, abilities, passions and intellect in service of God's Kingdom and humanity (cf. Costa 2007:17–27; Forster & Power 2011:46–59; Greene 2001:4–8, 2010:17–23; Hillman 2005, chap. 2, 2011:7–40; Johnson 2011:113–139; Keller & Leary-Alsdorf 2012:pt. 1; Silvano 2006:104–121, 2007:chap. 2; Spada & Scott 2011:20–41; Survey: Executive report *Survey: Executive report* 2012:4–7; Van Der Merwe et al. 2010:chap. 8).

5. See the following article for a broader discussion of Smit's three forms of church (Forster & Oostenbrink 2015:6–8; Philander 2011:77). Also, see Smit (2007b:63–68) for a thorough theological discussion of the three 'forms' of church referred to in this article.



The core principle that is at stake here is recognising that our labour, and our production, are not an end in themselves, but rather a means through which we can honour God and be faithful to working alongside God in achieving God's will in and for the world – which includes both human and non-human creation. The overarching theme that comes to the fore in the literature is that work is not intended as a curse to be endured, or avoided. In fact, it is given by God as a gift through which humans can participate in the *missio Dei* by transforming society in its various spheres (Bosch 2011:398–402). Moreover, work allows the Christian to give expression to the abilities, talents and gifts God has placed within each person. Note the direction of flow – work creates an opportunity for the expression of God-given talent, rather than talent being the creator of self-earned reward or recognition. Work also fosters the dignity of providing for the material and social needs of the individual and her or his community. As such, we need to be careful that we do not enforce the dualism that assumes that work is evil, a burden to be avoided and of no spiritual value. Work can be a gift and an expression of God's image within us. The wealth that is created through faithful work needs to be viewed with the same measure of moral responsibility as the tasks that led to its creation in the first place. It can be used unselfishly, and in service of God's will in the world.

Fifthly, Greene notes that the contemporary church has accepted a *flawed approach to mission* (Greene 2001:11). Many contemporary protestant and evangelical churches have focussed on evangelism and church growth, often to the exclusion of other forms of mission (such as social and economic transformation, engagement with social policy, transforming education, providing equitable healthcare, etc.). The laity, through their daily work, have many wonderful opportunities to transform, renew and strengthen social structures for the common good (amongst these are social, political and economic systems). These structures, which many of us encounter in our daily work life, are frequently the primary causes of suffering and sin in the world. Through our work, witness and service, we can contribute towards achieving God's justice, peace and flourishing for both human and non-human creation.

Greene suggests that the overarching failing of contemporary Christianity has been that it has enforced a 'great divide'. We have placed a division between the sacred and secular, between pastors and laity, between sacred spaces and profane spaces and between sacred times and profane times (Greene 2001:11, 2010:5–16). In short, we have inadvertently privatised our faith by primarily locating it within the home and the gathered church community. One way to rectify this is through re-imagining a public faith for Christianity and the church. Leslie Newbigin (1991) captures this concept very clearly and succinctly when he writes:

It should become part of the normal work of the Church to equip its members for the exercise of priesthood in the many different areas of secular [*sic*] life, and in terms of the specific powers that rule those areas. (p. 84)

An analysis of the *Call42* survey in South Africa on faith and work showed the following (Forster 2014:5; 'The Survey' 2013:1–2):

- Christians in South Africa are struggling to find significant meaning and purpose in their work.
- There is a hunger for a deeper focus on God and the principles of God's Kingdom in every aspect of life (both those parts that are formed around the gathered church, and those parts that are formed around the 'scattered' church).
- It appears that Churches struggle to adequately envision, equip and support Christians in the world of work. There is not sufficient training and support for faithful and responsible Christian discipleship in the world of work.
- A professional career matters to God. So does work outside the congregation and within the home or community. Each of us has a role to play in advancing God's Kingdom in society.

This is an area of great opportunity for the church. It is here that we can recapture the Protestant notion of work as vocation.

## Conclusion

This article has argued for the importance of a rediscovery of a theology of work that is based on the Protestant notion of vocation and calling. Such a view, it was argued, has the primary intention of fostering obedience and faithfulness to God. Secondly, it can empower and equip the church and individual Christians for effective and faithful living in all spheres of life. The article showed that the influences of theological dualism, an unbalanced view of the clergy as primary agents of ministry and mission, and a structures-centred view of ministry and mission detract from the possibility of the church's ministry in every sphere of society. The conclusion of this article is that the church will need to revisit and rediscover its theology of work and vocation.

This focus on 'calling' or 'vocation' seems appropriate in light of the discussion above. Keller and Leary-Alsdorf (2012) write concerning the concept of vocation:

Today the word often means simply a job, but that was not the original sense. A job is a vocation only if someone else calls you to do it and you do it for them rather than for yourself. And so our work can be a calling only if it is reimagined as a mission of service to something beyond merely our own interests. (p. 19)

As Volf says: 'Our work can find its ultimate meaning when, in working for ourselves and community, we work for God' (Volf 2011:34).

## Acknowledgements

With grateful thanks to Prof. Dr Wessel Bentley.



## Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this research article.

## Author's contributions

D.A.F. is the sole author of this research article.

## Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

## Funding information

This research was funded in part by funding for rated researchers from the National Research Foundation.

## Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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